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TAJIKISTAN: Dushanbe Jews ordered to vacate synagogue by July

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

As the city authorities in the capital Dushanbe order the local Jewish community to vacate their century-old synagogue by July to clear the site for a new presidential palace, the synagogue's rabbi has pleaded to allow it to remain. "The authorities could meet the Jews half-way and not demolish Tajikistan's only synagogue," Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 News Service. He stressed that the synagogue had been built by believers and that today's remaining Jewish community is too small and poor to rent a new building or build another synagogue. The city's senior religious affairs official told Forum 18 the synagogue is of "no historic value" and that there was no way it could be included in the reconstruction plan "because it would spoil the entire layout of the complex".

The Dushanbe city authorities have officially written to the Jewish community ordering them to vacate their century-old synagogue by July, the synagogue's chief rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 News Service from the Tajik capital on 18 May. The synagogue has been earmarked for demolition under a plan to build a "Palace of Nations" complex, a new residence for the president. "The authorities could meet the Jews half-way and not demolish Tajikistan's only synagogue," Abdurakhmanov declared. "Under Jewish laws, the demolition of the synagogue is a sacrilege," the chief rabbi of Central Asia and envoy of the worldwide Lubavich movement in Central Asia, Abe Dovid Gurevich, told Forum 18 in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 19 May. "Nevertheless, I am not a Muslim and I don't intend to declare a 'gazawat' (holy war) against the Tajik authorities."

Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, the head of the department for religious affairs at the Dushanbe city administration, claims that the synagogue is of "no historic value" and that there was no way in which it could be included in the reconstruction plan.

"Unfortunately, it is impossible to leave the synagogue standing alongside the newly-built palace of nations, because it would spoil the entire layout of the complex," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 9 May.

But Gurevich rejects this. "It has been hinted to me that many people in Dushanbe simply find it unpleasant that a synagogue should stand alongside the palace of nations," he told Forum 18.

Abdurakhmanov reports that the synagogue formally belongs to the state, following its nationalisation in 1952. However, the Dushanbe rabbi believes that "by law the synagogue should belong to the Jews who built it out of their own funds around 100 years ago". A commission of the hakimiat (administration) of the city's Ismail Somoni district originally approved the demolition in January 2003 (see F18News 28 August 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=129).

Abdurakhmanov said the authorities have now offered a plot of land where the Jewish community could build a new synagogue. But following the mass emigration of Jews at the beginning of the 1990s, there are only around 500 Jews left in the whole of Tajikistan. "Virtually all of them are very poor, elderly people," he told Forum 18. "The authorities need to understand that the Jewish community in Tajikistan today simply does not have the money either to build a synagogue or to rent a building."

City officials claim to be seeking a "reasonable compromise" with the community. "We are ready to give the Jewish community 0.15 hectares of land for construction of a synagogue, and also to offer it a building to rent in which to hold religious services until such time as the Jews build a new synagogue," Nuriddinov told Forum 18. He said they are awaiting Gurevich's planned visit to discuss possible solutions. "When he arrives in Dushanbe, we can discuss the details of this issue."

Gurevich told Forum 18 he intends to visit Dushanbe at the beginning of June and hopes to reach a compromise with the Tajik authorities.

For more background see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>

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